

## School librarians: Headed for the history books?



Bruce Bisping, Star Tribune

Tori Jensen, a librarian at Spring Lake Park High School, says librarians are essential to teaching students how to use resources.

As cash-strapped schools cut budgets, librarians find themselves on the chopping block.

By **DAAREL BURNETTE II**, Star Tribune

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School librarians across the state are being shelved.

Librarians have become a popular target as school administrators look for ways to cut budgets. A quarter of the state's librarians have lost their jobs in the past decade, with 767 remaining to serve the state's 1,992 public schools. Some of the state's

largest districts best illustrate the situation:

- Anoka-Hennepin has 29 librarians for its 35 schools with 40,000 students.
- St. Paul has 14 librarians for its 64 schools and 38,000 students.
- Minneapolis has 56 librarians for its 65 schools and 34,000 students.

Media centers -- formerly known as libraries -- have come a long way since the Dewey Decimal system. The cuts come at a time when information overload is the rule and, librarians say, though their jobs have changed, the need for them is greater than ever. Navigating information for a report on Frederick Douglass, for example, can be dizzying for a 10-year-old.

"I think we need help in exploring all that's out there in the world," said Mai Moua, a 15-year-old sophomore at Harding High School, which does have a librarian. "Most of my friends think they know everything because they have the computer to use, but I think we need librarians to give us a helping hand."

Rosemary Olatunbo Sun, 14, who was also in the Harding library Thursday morning, agrees: "Although the Internet has a lot of information, I wouldn't know where to start," she said.

"Everything has been impacted by technology," said Nancy Walton, the director of Minnesota's State



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Library Services. "Students need to know how to go online to use it safely, use it appropriately and understand the issues of intellectual freedom and copyright. Kids assume because it's on the Internet, it's free and they can use it as they want."

Librarians say media centers are often manned by parent volunteers, who aren't certified and rarely become involved with such things as updating book collections or teaching research skills to students.

## 'We have to cut somewhere'

Librarians, once a staple in schools, don't come cheap. Most have two, sometimes three, master's degrees. Their average annual salaries generally can range from \$50,000 to \$70,000.

The exodus has been steady since Minnesota legislators in 1996 got rid of a statute that required districts to have a minimum of one librarian per school. It has accelerated in the past five years as schools have tightened their budgets.

Librarians are funded through discretionary funds -- or all the money left over after they pay for teachers, administrators, secretaries and literacy coaches.

"It usually isn't much if it's anything at all," said Marilyn Baker, director of curriculum instruction and professional development for St. Paul public schools.

"Schools have to look for key people to keep. They look at media specialists and they say, 'This is an important position but we have to cut somewhere.'"

Bakers said that their district realizes the work doesn't all go away so St. Paul has trained its textbook coordinators to ensure there also is research material available that supports classroom curriculum and textbooks.

Minnesota isn't alone in its cuts, said Nancy Everhart, president of the American Association of School Librarians, which will host its 2011 national convention in Minneapolis. The majority of states no longer mandate librarians, she said.

"Legislators think the decisions are better made at the local level when resources get scarce," Everhart said. "Anything that's not tested nowadays, and anything that administrators don't see directly impacting test scores such as math and English ... everybody else is very vulnerable."

Nobody is more familiar with the dearth of librarians in the state than Tori Jensen, a librarian at Spring Lake Park High School, and president of Minnesota Educational Media Organization.

Jensen isn't your stereotypical librarian. She has tattoos that run up her arms and down her back, dyes her hair a bright red and drives a sleek black Mustang convertible to work.

"We do a lot more than just shush people," she said. "This is where groups of kids meet to talk about real-world problems and come up with real-world solutions."

In 2006, Jensen, with the help of a federal grant,

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successfully led a campaign to get boys to read more books. She teaches a course on research skills and works with teachers to find books that enhance curriculum.

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Those are essential skills, she said.

But she admits, given the financial pinch, the future isn't rosy for school librarians.

"This is an exciting and distressing time for librarians," Jensen said. "I think we're going to go away somewhat and then they're going to say, 'Oops.'"

"They'll be OK for three years and then find out there's nobody there to teach kids the skills that we are experts in. It's not a matter of bringing the resources to them, it's about teaching them how to use them."

Her bigger concern, however, is that school libraries might disappear entirely.

Minnesota's Department of Libraries, founded in 1899, predates the Department of Education, which eventually absorbed the library department. In 2002, the Education Department got rid of its physical library. Because schools aren't required to have libraries, some worry that they may be the next to go as officials look to build smaller, cheaper schools.

"I already see charter schools doing it," Jensen said. "I just hope public schools aren't next."

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